

Obituary

Kizhakkedathu Mathai Kochummen

Kerala, India, 6 July 1931 - Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 31 March 1999

Mr Kochummen, better known as Koch, was unsurpassed in Malaysia in his ability to identify a tree from a single leaf. It was his marvellous photographic memory that enabled him to do this, honed during a decade of botanical work at the Forest Research Institute at Kepong, where it was his duty to confirm the identification of fallen leaves collected during the large scale forest inventories that were being carried out by John Wyatt-Smith throughout the Peninsula (Ng and Saw, 1999). This culminated in his revisions of the *Pocket Check List of Timber Trees* (Wyatt-Smith, revised by Kochummen, 1964 and 1979) and stood him in good stead when he was involved in identifying the 335,240 trees with stem diameter 10 cm and above to their 814 species in the 50-ha plot in the Pasoh Forest Reserve (Kochummen, 1997).

Koch graduated with BSc from the University of Travancore in 1951 and, after coming to Malaya in 1952, obtained the post of Wyatt-Smith's Research Assistant in 1953. In 1955, he was promoted first to Assistant Botanist, then to Forest Botanist in 1971 and Senior Forest Botanist in 1980. Retirement in 1986 only opened new horizons for him when he took on consultancies (and he could name his price, for who else could identify trees as accurately as he could!) and a Senior Fellowship (1986–1991) with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute enumerating trees in the Pasoh Plot. In 1992, he became Senior Botanist for the Tree Flora of Sabah and Sarawak project, and before his untimely death had completed the revision of the Moraceae, which included many new taxa (Kochummen, 1998).

Indeed, Koch had already gained a reputation for tackling large and difficult families, such as the Lauraceae, Moraceae and Myrtaceae, from his chapters in the *Tree Flora of Malaya* volumes where he revised 24 of the 99 families.

To those who knew Koch personally, he will be greatly missed for his cheerful help always freely given, his enthusiasm in identifying specimens, his generous sharing of his experience in what are the vital characters that identify a particular plant. His legacy of the knowledge of practical and reliable vegetative characters of leaf, bole and bark are recounted in his *Tree Flora of Pasoh* (Kochummen, 1997).

References

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